

By Mathieu GODEFROY,
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What follows traces the efforts of a musician and three artist-craftsmen (Image 1) who pooled their talents, knowledge and know-how to produce a beautiful, essential, one-of-its-kind object.

Conceived by violinist and Baroque music specialist Mathieu Godefroy, built by violin maker Gert Eichhorn, and adorned by ornamental sculptor Aline Putot-Toupry and gilder Bruno Toupry, the first model of a new stringed instrument was born in 2014 in Paris near Place de la Bastille. It owes its life to the virtuoso's disappointment with the range of a violin's pitch, whose highest notes he finds neither very high nor very harmonious. M. Godefroy and G. Eichhorn designed the instrument according to the golden ratio, then fine-tuned its final shape until it was time to call it by its name: *Oiselon*, *Little Bird*.



Image 1 - (Above) The Group - Bruno Toupry, Aline Putot-Toupry, Mathieu Godefroy, Gert Eichhorn

Image 2 - (Top photo) The 3-stringed Oiselon



Image 3 - Uriel in da Vinci's -*Virgin of the Rocks*



Image 4 - Luca della Robbia's *Singing Gallery*

The Oiselon's shape and, especially, the high pitches it can provide relate it to piccolos and pochettes (pocket-size instruments used by dancing masters in the Baroque period). This kinship inspired M. Godefroy to further "baroquize" his conception. He decided to substitute the head of Medusa for the carved scroll that we expect to see at the end of a violin's neck, and to have the instrument's back plate adorned with two other elements from the legend of the snake-haired monster. One is the mirror-like shield that Athena, the goddess of wisdom, gave as a present to the aspiring hero Perseus; the other is an owl—a night bird that Ath-



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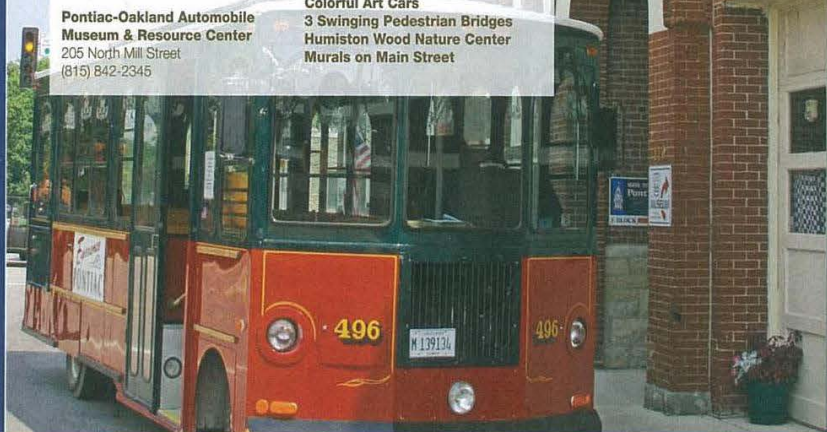
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Image 8 - Block of flame maple

Continued

ena carried on her shoulder as her adviser. The revolution in instrument-making, however, lies elsewhere. Whereas a violin has four strings the Oiselon has only three, but their total tension of 40 kg results in a higher pressure on the bridge and thus in a higher pitch (Image 2).

Gert Eichhorn selected woods that render a high, crystalline sound when struck: flame maple for the neck and spruce for the table. For an optimal outer finish and sound quality, he included powdered marble from the Michelangelo quarry

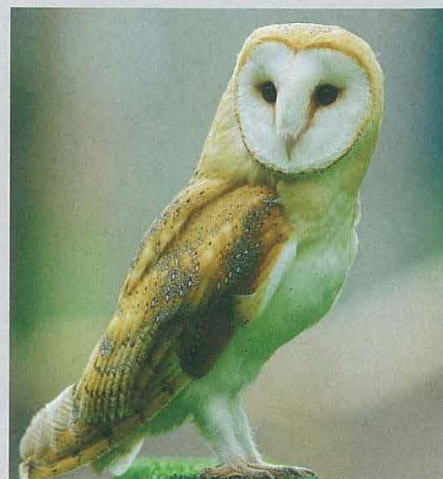


Image 5 - Barn Owl

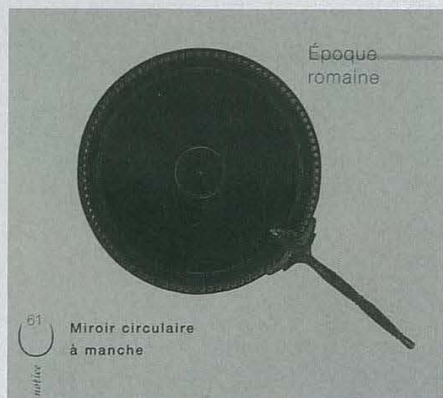


Image 6 - Pearl adorned mirror from the 6th century BC

in his wood filler (a client had previously given Aline Putot-Toupry a piece of this Carrara marble extracted from the part reserved for the Vatican!).

More than banal Baroque figures, the head of Medusa, the owl and the shield symbolize the instrument's noble function

Like her two sisters, Medusa turned into stone any man who glanced at her; unlike her sisters, she was mortal. Perseus was able to sever her terrifying head by focusing on its reflection in the shield but, to everyone's disappointment, the head went on turning living, breathing men into stone. At once dead and alive, the head came to symbolize the seemingly impassable threshold between the world of the living and the divine mysteries of the here-beyond, where all truths were believed to reside. And the true artist came to be thought of as the counterpart of Medusa's head; for the true artist was one who, because of his unique powers, elevated humanity on pain of his own death by petrification. Aided by his voice and lyre, or his chisel, or his brush and paint, the artist enticed mortals to forget their fear of trespassing into forbidden space; to allow themselves a glimpse at the mysteries of the gods; to perceive and relish what they could of the beauty of the truths these mysteries held; and to put their increased knowledge, wisdom and human powers to the best use possible on earth.



Image 7 - Owl perched on the shield

Under the player's bow, the Oiselon is more than fit to ravish human senses

When Aline Putot-Toupry designed the head, she drew inspiration from Gorgon masks featured in Greek temples (they always look straight ahead); from Greek statues (for the shape of the eyebrows and nose); from archangel Uriel in da Vinci's *Virgin of the Rocks* (for the shape of the eyes and high cheekbones) (Image 3); from the boys' facial expression in Luca della Robbia's *Singing Gallery* (for the contour of the mouth muscles as the head proffers its scream) (Image 4); and from a picture of a barn owl for the owl (Image 5). Of the nine snakes slithering among the hair, two are hissing to accompany the scream. Uriel "is



Image 9, 10, 11 - Sculpting the headstock



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Image 12 - Bruno Toupry gilding the carved headstock

often depicted carrying a book or a papyrus scroll representing wisdom,” a quality which he shares with Athena; besides, Uriel “is a patron of the Arts”.¹ Drawing from the da Vinci painting and the della Robbia bas-reliefs was Aline’s way to spiritualize and humanize Medusa underneath her terrifying mask, which she did not choose to wear.


Since pearls represent the spiritual world, Aline drew inspiration from a pearl-adorned mirror from the 6th century BC when she designed the gleaming shield (Image 6): for whereas the artist makes the pure beauty of higher truths available to mortals (according to their ability to perceive) by transforming this beauty into art, the shield validates the work of the artist by presenting art as a reflection of these truths. As for the owl perched on the shield (Image 7), it reminds us that the immortal being who enabled Perseus to deliver Medusa’s head into the world of humans was none other than the goddess of wisdom.

Aline built a clay model of the head to determine its optimal proportions relative to the rest of the instrument, gave her block of flame maple the appropriate shape and size (Image 8) and then began to sculpt in direct cut. The hair and the snakes undulate down the peg box and between the pegs (Images 9, 10, 11). The nine snakes remain close to the hair for greater structural strength and better sound. Three snakes are visible from any angle.

Flame maple is a tight assemblage of grain and cross-grain. To prevent tear-out, which threatened to occur every minute, Aline needed to feel each change in grain direction and modify the gouge’s direction accordingly. This work would not have been possible without her and Bruno’s old gouges, manufactured in the early 20th century, which they

patiently acquired over 20 years. Very precious and irreplaceable, such gouges make one with the sculptor’s hand; their flexibility and their sharpness are incomparable.

Bruno Toupry used gold from Maison Dauvet, the last French goldbeater. He gilded the shield with white gold but the snakes with yellow gold to stress the magic and warrior-like quality of the Medusa figure (Images 12, 13).

The first concert featuring the Oiselon was performed 123 avenue Daumesnil on October 16, 2014, with the support of SEMAEST (Société d’économie mixte de la Ville de Paris) and of the councils of the 11th and 12th arrondissements of Paris. Since then, the Oiselon has made itself known throughout France and has its own Facebook page. An album is under way. 

1 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uriel>
Web sites to consult:
<https://www.facebook.com/mathieu.godefroy.31> ; <https://www.facebook.com/oiselonoiselonoiselon>



Image 13 - Medusa figure